

ARIA EVANS:

Hi, I'm Aria Evans. Welcome to The 'D' Word podcast, where we work to demystify dance. Forms of movement have been practiced since time immemorial. I'm here to reveal insights into why physical expression matters, what it does in our bodies when we watch it, and how it lives within our daily lives. This season, our theme is transformation-transforming relationships, identity, our way of thinking and social hierarchies through movement. How does dance do this? Let's dive in and find out. This episode we are speaking with Shannon Litzenberger. Shannon is an award winning choreographer, director, and embodiment facilitator. Her imaginative collaborations connect art forms and communities, centering participatory experiences in artistic processes. The creative principles and embodied practices she works with regularly in the studio, are also central to her work in leadership development, organizational culture development, and systems change. She works frequently across corporate, academic, and nonprofit spaces in support of creating a healthier, more interconnected, equitable, and resilient society. So I know you as someone who does many, many, many, many things. And I'm curious if you can share with our listeners how you specifically describe your embodiment leadership practice? What does that look like?

SHANNON LITZENBERGER:

Well, because my work sort of cuts across, or intersects within the world of art making, and the world of leadership development, and the world of systems change, my practice of leadership development also integrates these three spaces. So I'm working with movement based, embodied, felt sense experience practices to bring about new collective habits, new group dynamics, and new ways of being together that create different kinds of leadership, more collaborative leadership, leadership that is less hierarchical, less about oversight, and more about shared practice.

**This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

The 'D' Word Season 4 - Episode 4

ARIA EVANS: When I think about all of the conversations that we've had as friends, as colleagues, as collaborators, I always sort of zero in that the central theme that it feels like you return to often in many of your practices, is about change making. And I'm curious why that's important to you.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Well, I think it's maybe an obvious thing to say, but I'll say it anyways.

ARIA EVANS: Say the obvious.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Yeah [laughs]. Change is important because how things are, aren't great.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, yeah.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: And you know, I think the pandemic revealed that in spades. But also, you know, for many of us, it didn't take a pandemic to understand that there are many, oppressive dynamics at play in our society, and structures that are designed to create harm, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in the ways that our world is governed, the way that our world is led, the way that our world is organized. And so, yes, change is important, but I think maybe one of the more specific inquiries right now is change to what? What are we actually changing toward? And you know, through my research, I am working on becoming more specific about that. And the places that are sources of wisdom for me are both like Indigenous cosmologies and creative practice. And I think these two spaces have a strong relationship because, you know, Indigenous cosmologies are inherently relational, and think about being in right relationship with self, others, and the natural world, and they are Earth cosmologies. They understand that our survival is inherently coupled to the health of our planet, of Mother Earth. And creative capacities work on those relationships. The creative capacities that you and I

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work with in the studio, they are designed to shift relationships to self, others, and the world around us. I mean, artists, through these creative capacities, are world making. We're exploring these questions. It's very inquiry based. It's not product oriented, even though there are often products that come out on the other side. But as artists, we're a bit different than designers in the sense that we don't seek to solve problems, we seek to create things that didn't exist before. And I think that there's an important distinction in that, and that creative practice can lend these capacities of world making and creation to a wider co-creative act in reimagining, recreating society in new ways.

ARIA EVANS:

It's so interesting to hear you talk about the role of the artist in forming spaces. And that's also what you're doing in the leadership capacity too. You're giving people information about how they're activating a space to potentially transform it. I'm curious if you have different definitions of leadership across your different practices.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER:

I can share that one of the definitions that I like and that, you know, evokes some of the thinking that I've done around leadership is that leadership is our ability to respond generatively to what a moment is asking of us, in service of collective thriving. I know that's long [laughs], but it has some parts. And I'd like just to unpack it a little bit. So within that statement, you know, our ability to respond generatively- like, what is the capacity to respond? What informs our response? How we are attuned through ourselves as bodies, through our ability to sense the world around us, we are attuning. And that attunement, and the way that we pay attention shapes our sense of reality. And that is ultimately what we're responding to. We're responding to a sense of our reality that is determined through our visceral, embodied engagement with the world. Like this is the basis of all cognition. It's the

basis of thinking. There's no conceptual thinking that arises separately from this self in the world engagement. And so this ability to respond well, generativity, in service of collective thriving requires a deep attunement and an expanded attentional awareness. So this is where we start to see clues about what we should be practicing. Well, we can practice a deeper attunement, we can practice an expanded attentional awareness in order to respond in right relation. To respond toward an aim of collective thriving. And that piece, that tail, 'in service of collective thriving' in the definition is something that wasn't there at the beginning and that I recognized seemed essential because, you know, responding to what a moment is asking of us can also be a moral response, an ethical response. Like a response that's coupled to an ideology or a certain politic. And so the notion of collective thriving feels like it's an essential, fundamental politic that we need to embrace if we're going to move toward this paradigm of relationality. Like if our decisions are realizing missions and goals and visions and mandates, that are not in service of collective thriving, then they are inherently coming at a cost.

ARIA EVANS:

So much of your work, I feel like, also allows people to embrace failure. And I'm curious about how you make sense of both of those paradigms ultimately within the work that you do.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER:

Yeah, I mean, failure in the kind of like industrial era mode of leadership and management is like, you know, often seen as a negative. Like even the word failure, if you say the word failure and just feel what that feels like in your body, like for me, it's like a collapse. It's like my shoulders are slumping forward and I feel my heart drop. It's like a failure. [Laughs]. But, you know, failure is really an essential part of a process of learning. And if we're not in a process of learning, then we are not changing. If we're not

engaging in novel experiences that we are un-practiced at, then we are not learning and transformation is not possible. And I think this is a little bit of the paradox of this moment, is that we are, because of the dynamics of the world around us, increasingly, as people, in a state of distress. And from a state of distress, what we seek is the familiar. We seek the comforts of the familiar. Because change puts a demand on our nervous systems, it puts a demand on our physical resources, and we are already feeling incredibly depleted. And so it's sort of like this phenomenon. Do you remember at the beginning of the pandemic, this, like, propensity to go back and watch old movies from your childhood? [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS:

[Laughs]. Absolutely. Yeah. Like it's something to just be able to relax around. You know, to expect.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER:

Yeah, something that is not challenging. That is not demanding anything of you, and that you already have a relationship with, that might bring you joy or comfort or evoke a sense of nostalgia. But the paradox of this moment is that the imperative of change couldn't be more potent, and our capacity to do it couldn't be more compromised. It's like if you had never thrown a Frisbee before and someone put a Frisbee in your hand, the idea that you're not going to immediately fail at getting that thing to fly across the field, I mean, it's inevitable, right? But it's part of the process. It doesn't mean it's going to be like that forever. But we have to build capacity. And I think that's really the thrust of a lot of the leadership work that I've been doing is, what are the new capacities that we need to build that are not the ones we have been building and working on and are well-practiced at that align with this industrial era mode of leadership and being in the world. But what are these other capacities, and how do we slowly, over time, build the muscles to do this?

ARIA EVANS: It's your last chance to submit to be a part of The Dance Current's Fall 2024 print issue. We are a genre inclusive magazine, and we want to hear from dancers, movers, educators, audience members, and writers of all backgrounds. What are you thinking about? What are you engaging in? What should we highlight? Send us your ideas for features, photo essays, artist profiles, personal columns, dance criticism, and more to submissions at thedancecurrent.com. Please submit by tomorrow, August 26th. And don't forget to check out our summer issue on newsstands next week.

I want to take a moment to, like, zoom in on Shannon for a second, because I often think about how we end up in the places that we are. How we end up thinking about the things that we dedicate our lives to. And you know, what got us to the place that we're at now? And what was it that first brought you into the, sort of like, cultural leadership development space? How did that happen?

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Yes. I have a very fun story to tell.

ARIA EVANS: Great!

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Because it actually, like genuinely arose out of a creative project. So in 2013, I was developing a project called Everyday Marvels. That was a collaboration with the Gardiner Museum for Nuit Blanche in Toronto. And so as part of that project, it really had a community focus. It was about engaging choreographers to work with recently graduated dance artists who were cast together with more senior, experienced artists. And it was kind of a shake up. Like it was meant to shake up the familiar dynamics in our community and allow choreographers to work with different people and allow young artists to have experience, like a first experience as a newly

graduated professional dancer in the field. And also, alongside that project I was in conversation with my financial advisor at RBC who had got excited about the fact that I'm a choreographer because he was part of a glee club at the bank. Like they spent their lunch hours singing together. And so, you know, he was like, 'Well, hey, you're a choreographer. Do you want to come and choreograph some moves for our glee club?' And I was really taken by his enthusiasm. But in my mind I was like, 'No, I really don't. I really don't. This is not my thing. I'm a contemporary choreographer and I do very serious work.' [Laughs]. But, upon reflection, I thought, oh, this would be such an amazing opportunity to actually engage the bankers in the Nuit Blanche project. And so I proposed back to him that his glee club could work with me to develop an original piece of choreography that would be performed as one of the excerpts that was being performed at Nuit Blanche, at the Gardiner Museum. And so the Bank Notes, that was the name of their glee club.

ARIA EVANS:

Of course! Come on.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER:

Yeah [laughs]. So the Bank Notes rented an auditorium at the bank, and I would go every Monday evening after work, and we worked together to collaboratively develop a dance work. Like a contemporary movement piece. And, this was the real transformative moment for me, because as we worked in this process, they started to tell me that the culture at work was changing. And I was really fascinated by this. And, you know, the project really picked up momentum. So like, other people at the bank started to want to join the group. There were quite a few of them. I think there was something like 25 or 30 of them. So we started to interview them and ask them about their experience, and we realized that we were building a kind of collective capacity as we were creating these dance works. And that collective

capacity, unlike a lot of corporate team building things, wasn't about going to a bar and drinking together, or going out to eat. It wasn't about golf or wasn't about competitive team building events. It was about collaboration. It was about movement. There were a lot of folks in the group where English wasn't their first language, and so it also provided a way of relating that was very accessible. And so it was quite a moving project. They did perform all night and expressed some really beautiful reflections about their experience. And for me, I was like, 'Okay, there is something to this'. And that really was the very beginning of now what's become really, very central to my work in practice, is, how do collective embodied experiences bring about transformative change? And then they were so excited about dance that they renamed their group the Mobile Assets.

ARIA EVANS: Awe! [Laughs].

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Which I thought was hilarious. [Laughs]. So that they could include the dance part. [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: Yes. Of course. Oh, that's so funny. It's so interesting to hear the onset of that journey being about your choreographic creative process, really showing you what was possible in other realms. And I'm curious if now, having spent a lot of time researching, investing in, and practicing the leadership side of it, has there been a moment where that's like reflected back around to your choreographic practice?

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think one is always informing the other. And I mean, it might not be a surprise to you that I'm really kind of obsessed with process. Like how process is designed, how it's facilitated, what kind of feelings it evokes for the people participating, how it engages with the agency and creative contributions of people in the group. And so, in my own creative practice, I think one of the

questions I've been asking is like, what's the role of a choreographer? And we know that there's a kind of shift away from the capital C choreographer who comes in with like, movement phrases and an aesthetic that comes out of their body that gets learned in the room by other bodies. And you know, there are still likely some choreographers that do work that way and that their aesthetic has become like their signature, a way of identifying their work. And I've just been questioning this for myself because I love inviting creative contributions from others, but I think when I want to do that, I also need to invite the possibility of an aesthetic, a kind of collective aesthetic, that is not yet known to me at the beginning of the process. And really, the studio is also my practice ground as a facilitator. And I think that this is where leadership development practice has a lot to learn too. Because when I think about examples of where there's a potential of this relational leadership and this generative culture making process, I see it in the studio. It remains quite invisible, I think, in our fields, because what we celebrate in our field is what we see at the end of that process. We celebrate what goes on stage, and we celebrate the artifact of the art and the performance of the art. But we don't actually take time to see or acknowledge the processes that make that art.

ARIA EVANS:

Yeah. And it's so interesting, to loop back to the idea of an aesthetic that is recognizable across a choreographer's life's work, versus maybe what you're describing more as a value-based aesthetic, but then how do we encourage people who are coming to see this value-based aesthetic to understand that there's something deeper to appreciate? And, I mean, this conversation isn't to heal our issues around audience engagement. But it's a really interesting proposal of like, what are the shifts that need to happen in order for our industry to work in a way where we are

appreciating and valuing and giving artistic freedom to both the collaborators and the artistic teams?

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: I know. I mean, this is the world making process, right?

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, yeah.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: When audiences come with certain kinds of expectations because they have certain reference points, then we start to provide new reference points. And, you know, on some level, because we work in an embodied form where our bodies are the medium, I think there is a visceral connection. I do believe that audiences are sophisticated and discerning and that when they are witnessing a work where the artists have had a healthy process and are deeply attuned to each other, to the expression of the work, that on some level, even if it's hard to articulate, I think we can sense that. Sometimes we don't always sense the opposite. Like sometimes when the performers have not had a healthy process and are in a kind of state of execution of the work, I think we don't always read that, but I think it is also possible to sense that if we tune in. I mean, I think one of the tricky things is that we are increasingly in a disembodied society. And I think that's why dance, I mean, at least in the lifespan of my career, dance has never been front and center as a form that attracts large audiences. I mean, outside of ballet. I would say that has a very robust history of creating reference points for the audience. Right. Like to the point where sometimes ballet is used interchangeably with the word dance in Western culture, which is also fascinating and a product of our shaping around our relationship to movement and dance. But, you know, with a world that is quite disembodied, then, you know, we've kind of all had the experience where audiences will come to see a dance work that doesn't take a narrative form, and there's a desire to understand that conceptual

dimension or narrative dimension of something as a form of understanding. Whereas like understanding through a felt sense experience or through emotional landscape is just less familiar. And our world is moving heavily toward a digital mediation and a stronger prevalence of, you know, AI and technology that is really, really coupled to a rationalist, data driven way of seeing the world. And so it just fuels my desire to continue working in these embodied ways, because it's the complement. And it doesn't surprise me that it's hard to invite a rationalist society into embodied experiences. But I also believe that we won't be able to ignore this feeling of dis-ease and unwellness forever, and that we are going to have to start feeling our way into another way of being. And when those recognitions start to come, then there will be us dance folks being like, 'Hey, come move with us'.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs]. We have the skills!

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Yeah, [laughs]. Come move with us. And, oh yeah! There was this incredible study that was released, recently that was looking at treatment for anxiety and depression and discovered, not surprisingly to you Aria, that dance- collective movement and dance, had the biggest positive impact on treating anxiety and depression. Even more than all forms of drugs.

ARIA EVANS: Connected to this train that we're on. It's another, sort of, big picture question. We are in a critical moment right now in the Arts. Funding is being cut and impact is being questioned, which, you know [laughs], articles like this really help support what we're doing. But companies are struggling to stay afloat. And I'm curious if you could offer one reflection or area to lean into that would support the transformation of how the Arts world is working right now, what would it be?

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: Oh my goodness. Well, it's hard to narrow to just one, but I'll try.

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ARIA EVANS: You can give us more. [Laughs].

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: [Laughs]. Well, maybe just to start, I think one possibility is to already start thinking beyond art as a system of cultural production. Like, I think one of the offers that the Arts world, and particularly artist practitioners can make in this moment of big change, and also this big moment of questioning the value of the arts, is to illuminate the way that art is more than an experience and artifact. It is more than just a system of cultural production that is an industry sector in society that has an economic return. These arguments can still be useful in certain contexts, like especially if you're talking to the Minister of Finance.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah.

SHANNON LITZENBERGER: But I think, you know, for broader society, we need to remember that long before a system of cultural production, art was a practice of social cohesion. It was a practice of community wellness. It was a way that ritualized important milestones and moments. It was a way of storing our understanding, our shared understanding of the world. And some of those functions still come through aspects of the system of cultural production. But why limit ourselves to that forum? Why not start collaborating with healthcare, with leadership development, with the education sector, you know, with urban design? Like, how can these processes that are inherent in artmaking lend themselves to the imagination of new systems and other sectors of society? And I think this is where we really need to start engaging our imaginations as a field. Because I do believe there are other kinds of resources out there that can support us beyond, you know, the grant funding that is dwindling. And that is just heartbreaking to see how many incredible projects, incredible artists, incredible companies are, you know, just struggling, struggling to survive. Like

we are in a state of collapse and we can't pretend that we're not. Our system is collapsing inside the Arts just like it is in the wider world. And so if we dedicate all of our time and energy to hanging on, we're not gonna have any energy left.

ARIA EVANS:

My final question to you is, if you're up for sharing, has there been a transformational moment for you in your life as an artistic leader?

SHANNON LITZENBERGER:

Oh this will seem obvious, but the pandemic was a big transformational moment for me as well. And I think the way that it was transformational is that all of the work that I had been doing, you know, in the 20 years leading up to the pandemic, like in the last parts of my career, were about finding a sense of equity inside the public funding system, and acknowledging that my experiences as an artist were fraught at times. And I was always kind of looking at the system. And I think one of the moments of transformation for me through the pandemic was like, 'Oh, this system also exists in me'. That there are things that I am coupled to, that are perpetuating this system, and that for me, systems change became way more personal. And so I think this is one of the insights that I gleaned, and that also has become very central to my work, is that systems change. Work begins with self. Like, we are the system. We are the system, and our behaviors either perpetuate a status quo or they invite new possibilities of being. And so this is something that I'm always working on personally and hopefully also through my embodied facilitation practice, inviting in others as well.

ARIA EVANS:

Yeah, it's personal. [Laughs]. And thank you for sharing. To keep in touch with Shannon's work, head to her website shannonlitzenberger.com. And that's our show. The 'D' Word is presented by dance: made in canada/ fait au canada, a biennial contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists with

unique artistic visions from all cultural backgrounds. The 'D' Word airs annually, as well as our dance film screening series available at dancemadeincanada.ca. The 'D' Word is produced by Mayumi Lashbrook with Taylor Young, editor and composer Jamar Powell, sound engineer Chris Dupuis at 1990 Studios, and cover photography by Marlowe Porter. And I'm your host Aria Evans. Thank you to Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and Toronto Arts Council for making The 'D' Word possible. Find us wherever you get your podcasts and don't forget to rate and review. Let dance transform you.